

How Can We Help?

Lessons from Federal Drop-Out Prevention Programs

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HOW CAN WE HELP?

LESSONS FROM FEDERAL DROPOUT-PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Dropping out of school is easy. Students who have done it say they simply stopped going to school one day. Some said they dropped out because they thought school principals or teachers wanted them to. Others said they dropped out because of circumstances beyond their control. Either way, they may have encountered little resistance from others around them.

Dropping out is a signal that someone has not succeeded in school and may not succeed in adult life.

As a society, we do not want students to drop out. We know that those who do probably are not prepared for what happens to them afterward. Most will not work as much as students who graduate and will not earn as much when they do work. Economic trends are likely to make this situation worse rather than better. Dropouts are more likely to depend on public assistance, use drugs, be arrested, and spend time behind bars. We want students to succeed in school and as adults. Dropping out is a signal that someone has not succeeded in school and may not succeed in adult life. But how can dropping out be prevented?

This publication summarizes findings from an evaluation of the second phase of the U.S. Department of Education's School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP). The program operated from 1991 to 1996 and was the longest and largest of three dropout-prevention programs funded by the federal government. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., conducted the evaluation, with Policy Studies Associates and RMC Research. The study looked at a range of questions, including how programs supported by the SDDAP used their funds, what kinds of students were served, and, crucially, whether programs kept students in school. The researchers studied the experiences of more than 20 programs and collected data for more than 10,000 students to measure program effects. For some programs, they also collected data from teachers and parents.

FINDINGS IN BRIEF

Some programs made a difference. Large demonstration programs such as the SDDAP are fertile ground for testing new ideas and approaches. The evaluation identified several promising program models. Programs preparing students who had already dropped out to get the General Educational Development (GED) certificate improved GED completion rates. An alternative high school on a community college campus reduced dropout rates, as did several alternative middle schools. And school restructuring efforts that

focused on changing what happened in the classroom improved test scores and led teachers to view school more positively.

Policymakers and program designers who want to follow any of these paths will face trade-offs. For example, current research has led to questions about the value of the GED. Alternative middle schools, by their nature, separate at-risk students from other students. And changing what happens in the classroom is one of the most difficult tasks facing any school reform effort. Whether embarking in one of these directions is “worth it” depends on schools’ and communities’ values and perceptions of the dropout problem, as well as their willingness to explore new directions.

THE PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

For five years beginning in 1991, the SDDAP provided federal support for local efforts to reduce the dropout rate. The U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to school districts, nonprofit community-based organizations, and educational partnerships—65 grants in 1991 and an additional 20 in 1992. Grants supported two kinds of programs. Targeted programs operated in schools or community organizations and provided services to help youths stay in school and improve their school outcomes. Restructuring programs promoted organizational and instructional reform in schools where dropping out was a widespread problem. Costs for the targeted programs averaged around \$450,000 per program each year, and costs for restructuring programs averaged around \$1 million per program each year.

It is clear that risk factors do not predict exactly who will be a dropout.

The SDDAP grant announcement specified that funded programs had to adopt a comprehensive approach to serving at-risk students. This approach could include counseling and support services, attendance monitoring, challenging curricula, accelerated learning strategies, culturally sensitive parental outreach, enhanced links between middle schools and high schools, and career-awareness activities.

Programs were allowed wide latitude in how they served students and adopted a range of interesting and innovative approaches for addressing the dropout problem. Program models included alternative middle and high schools, schools within schools, and other structures. But all programs in the evaluation shared two features. More than regular schools, they tried to help students overcome personal, family, and social barriers that interfered with their ability to go to school and do well there, using counseling as the primary approach. They also tried to create smaller and more personal settings in which students could feel secure and learn more effectively.

| TYPES OF DROPOUT-PREVENTION PROGRAMS | |
|---|--|
| Targeted | Operated as smaller-scale programs within schools or community-based organizations, targeting at-risk students |
| Restructuring | Focused on changing entire schools with dropout-prone populations |

Risk Factors: Not Exact Predictors

Both restructuring and targeted programs served students who were at risk of dropping out. For example, these students were more likely to:

- Live in a single-parent household
- Have parents or a sibling who did not complete high school
- Be home alone more than three hours a day
- Have low income or receive public assistance
- Have limited English proficiency

Many students also had poor attendance records or had previously dropped out. However, some at-risk students did not conform to the stereotypical perception of a dropout. For example, some had excellent attendance records and high aspirations for completing school.

It is clear that risk factors do not predict exactly who will be a dropout. Some dropouts have no risk factors, and some students with many risk factors stay in school. The researchers found that poor attendance best predicts whether students will drop out, but it is not highly predictive of dropping out. Identifying who should receive dropout prevention services is a challenging task.

An Uneasy Place in the Larger System

The context in which programs operated affected their effectiveness and ability to adapt to change. The programs generally functioned within schools or school districts or were collaborations between these entities and other organizations. Programs that were not trying to change how regular schools worked usually had a smoother time with implementation.

The following examples illustrate some of the issues that arose when new programs interacted with established operations:

- **Partnerships between community-based organizations and school districts** were rarely equal. These alliances depended on the actions of districts and schools, which in turn depended heavily on larger forces, such as budgets and changes in leadership. Partnerships were more effective when community-based organizations worked closely with schools in the early stages of setting up programs, to build support and to identify clear roles and responsibilities, and were flexible in adapting to changes.
- **Alternative schools** tried to change student experiences by offering a new kind of school but struggled to coexist with regular schools. Some alternative schools ran into problems recruiting students, which led districts to question the need for these schools. And alternative schools also grappled with how to create an academic setting in which students with a history of failing would do better.

The study suggests that the choice of teachers in alternative schools was more important than the choice of curriculum.

FOUR DIFFERENT APPROACHES USED BY ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

1. Teaching the material in the usual way, but in smaller classes
2. Picking up the pace and pushing students to learn more and faster
3. Developing challenging curricula, often by creating thematic and interdisciplinary units
4. Using competency-based curricula that let students work independently and at their own pace

The study suggests that the choice of teachers in alternative schools was more important than the choice of curriculum. When teachers pushed students hard to learn while caring about them as individuals, students wanted to work harder and succeed. The lesson may be that alternative schools must think carefully about attracting or training teachers who are comfortable teaching students with a history of failure.

- **The term “school restructuring”** was used broadly for a variety of reforms and services that were a major part of the SDDAP. These efforts tried to change the structure of schools so that more students would stay in school. The reforms and services attempted under this rubric included school-based governance, school councils, outcomes-based education, block scheduling, minischools, and interdisciplinary instruction. Counseling and attendance monitoring also figured prominently in these initiatives. But researchers did not observe much change, or even signs of its

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beginning, where school restructuring was attempted. Restructuring schools found it easier to add dropout-prevention services than to change teaching and learning. Some initiatives managed to change teaching and learning to a degree, but the changes were fragile and easily undone if district leadership or local political contexts shifted. One obstacle to restructuring was that the grants were often written by one group and carried out by another. Enthusiasm for restructuring on the part of grant writers did not always translate into enthusiasm for restructuring on the part of teachers and principals, whose activities, roles, and relationships may be altered by restructuring. If restructuring is to be more than just a passing phase, it is important to develop support for restructuring from the people who will need to carry it out.

MEASURING IMPACTS

An extensive impact evaluation of all 85 programs receiving SDDAP funding was not feasible, so the evaluation team worked with the U.S. Department of Education to select 5 restructuring programs and 16 targeted programs for in-depth evaluation. The programs selected were promising models that served enough students to yield reliable estimates of program effects.

Targeted programs. An experimental design was used to measure program impacts. It compared what happened to participants with what happened to students who were *statistically equivalent* to participants. Because more students were eligible than could be served, it was possible to randomly divide them into two groups, one that participated in the program and one that did not. Each group was followed for a two- to three-year period.

Restructuring programs. A comparison group methodology was used to measure program impacts. The researchers selected a group of students in schools with characteristics similar to those in the schools involved in the restructuring effort. They then measured student, teacher, and parent outcomes over time in both restructured and comparison schools and compared trends in these outcomes. This methodology has a known weakness that affects how results are interpreted—schools can differ in ways not easily seen, or they can differ over time because of changes unrelated to restructuring. Evaluation results are interpreted with this weakness in mind.

Alternative Middle Schools: Early and Intensive Intervention

Communities and school districts that take the term “dropout prevention” most literally set up programs for students in middle school or earlier grades. To truly prevent dropping out, the thinking goes, interventions must start before students have left school or are so far behind academically and alienated from school emotionally that dropping out is just a matter of time.

A key issue for middle school dropout-prevention programs is whether students are best served by supplemental help or by a more intensive intervention. The modest evidence on middle school program impacts from

our study favors the intensive approach. The four programs that took this approach typically taught students in smaller classrooms and provided more intensive counseling. Three of the four programs attempted to accelerate students' academic progress to allow them to "catch up" with their age peers. The evidence showed that these programs helped more students to advance to higher grade levels.

Taking the Short Road in High School

... participants in GED programs were more likely to earn GED certificates than control group students.

Dropout-prevention programs for students of high school age face a different dilemma than middle school programs. Should students take the long road and stay in school to earn a diploma? Or should they take the short road and earn a GED certificate?

The evaluation's evidence favors the short road. Of the programs that offered high school diplomas, none significantly lowered dropout rates. In contrast, participants in GED programs were more likely to earn GED certificates than control group students.

Findings for one alternative high school suggest that taking the long road to a high school diploma is appropriate for at-risk students who can demonstrate their commitment to succeed. An alternative high school that screened prospective students in interviews to assess their motivation and potential to succeed in the school showed impacts on diploma completion rates. Compared to a control group, more of the program's students received diplomas, and fewer received GED certificates.

Restructuring Schools: Focus on the Classroom

The largest federal dropout-prevention grants went to efforts to restructure schools. The impacts of restructuring on student outcomes generally were negligible and consistent with our finding that these efforts did not often result in change. However, schools where some outcomes did improve provide a clue about the type of restructuring initiative with the most promise. Schools were more likely to show improved outcomes when their restructuring efforts focused on improving curriculum and instruction through staff development workshops, summer training sessions, and classroom implementation. Restructuring has more promise when it focuses on changing the classroom experience rather than on providing dropout-prevention services, such as attendance monitoring, health clinics, child-care centers, or special counselors.

HOW CAN WE HELP?

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE DROPOUT-PREVENTION EFFORTS

- Alternative middle schools
- Alternative high schools for students with motivation or academic potential
- GED programs for older students
- Restructuring built on classroom change

Before adopting a program model, educators must ask themselves fundamental questions about the nature of the dropout problem in their area. Why are students dropping out? Who should be served? Can a program be right for more than a few of those it serves? Are we addressing only symptoms, without knowing what the real problems are?

Diploma programs may be better for at-risk students with the potential to succeed.

If we do not really know why students are dropping out, setting up dropout-prevention programs will almost surely yield weak results. Simply pumping resources into schools to create smaller schools, reduce class sizes, and provide support services will not generate change if large schools, large classes, and a lack of support services were not the real problem in the first place. Millions of dollars could be spent to reduce dropping out only slightly, an undesirable outcome in an era of performance standards and pressure for more accountable government and schools.

Alternatively, schools could use an individualized approach to helping students. When students are doing poorly or are on the verge of dropping out, do staff talk with them and set up a plan to mitigate their problems? Is adherence to the plan monitored, and are results fed back to the staff and students so they can make adjustments? What about when they have dropped out and want to return to school? Do schools have access to services that can help families and students deal with personal problems? If a student has disagreements or arguments with teachers or other students, does someone in the school intervene to mediate? Are parents actively involved with teachers and school staff to solve problems and address issues affecting their children?

A school that answers “sometimes,” “maybe,” or “no” to any of these questions has room for an individualized approach to dropout prevention. Although schools cannot make all of their students happy or willing to attend, this approach is worth a try.

How can we help? For some students, the promising directions found in the evaluation may help. We also can go further. We can ask what it would take

for schools to keep their students and do away with their dropout-prevention programs. This is an ambitious goal, but the benefits of striving for it are huge. Perhaps dropout prevention should be only one part of a larger goal of creating schools where all students are given the assistance and opportunities they need to learn and develop into successful adults.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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“How Can We Help? What We Have Learned from Evaluations of Federal Dropout-Prevention Programs.” Full report on which this summary is based. Mark Dynarski and Philip Gleason. June 1998. PR98-40, 32 pages, \$2.50.

“Understanding the Trend Toward Alternative Certification for High School Graduates.” Sheds light on why some types of students choose the GED over a high school diploma. Roberto Agodini and Mark Dynarski. June 1998. PR98-39, 37 pages, \$3.00.

“Do We Know Whom to Serve? Issues in Using Risk Factors to Identify Dropouts.” Evaluates the predictive quality of characteristics commonly used to identify potential dropouts. Philip Gleason and Mark Dynarski. June 1998. PR98-41, 32 pages, \$2.50.

“School Performance and Early Childbearing: Identifying Girls at Risk of Teenage Parenthood.” Examines whether school performance and other school-related measures for middle school and early high school girls can predict whether they will go on to become teenage parents, finding that frequent absenteeism is an important predictor. Robert G. Wood. June 1998. PR98-42, 48 pages, \$3.50.

“Impacts of School Restructuring Initiatives.” Looks at whether efforts to make schools more interesting and responsive places for learning had effects on students, teachers, and parents. Mark Dynarski, Philip Gleason, Anu Rangarajan, and Robert G. Wood. June 1998. PR98-43, 257 pages, \$17.00.

“Impacts of Dropout Prevention Programs.” Examines whether programs improved dropout rates, attendance rates, test scores, self-esteem, alcohol and drug use, and other factors. Mark Dynarski, Philip Gleason, Anu Rangarajan, and Robert G. Wood. June 1998. PR98-44, 117 pages, \$8.00.

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